

2 PLANNING CONTEXT

The combined effect of three factors—H Street’s strategic location, critical mass of large-scale private investments in the area, and public initiative to improve neighborhood livability and economic vitality—make this a perfect time to plan for the corridor’s future.

2.1 Strategic Location in the City

The H Street corridor benefits greatly from its strategic location within the city and region. The corridor has and continues to serve both as a pedestrian-oriented retail street and a vital link in the District’s transportation (vehicular and transit) network. Striking a sustainable balance between these interrelated roles—destination and movement corridor—is among the central challenges of the current planning effort.

A District Destination

As historic photographs suggest and long-time residents and property owners confirm, H Street in the mid 1900s—both before and after integration in 1954—was among the District’s most lively, safe and attractive shopping destinations. Residents from the surrounding neighborhoods—known today as the Near Northeast neighborhood to the north and the Stanton Park and Linden neighborhoods to the South—could satisfy virtually all their needs for goods and services along the corridor, as well as their desire for entertainment and eating. With diverse offerings and evening hours, H Street also became an important after-work and weekend shopping district

serving the entire District. Neighborhood histories indicate that H Street ranked among the top three commercial districts in the City.

As with other urban commercial corridors, conditions along H Street started to decline in the 1960’s. Suburban competition, rapid population losses in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the 1968 riots combined to diminish H Street’s position as a regional destination and neighborhood-shopping street. Records of the construction activity along the corridor provide evidence of changes in the pace and pattern of investment. 165 of the corridor’s existing 323 buildings were built between 1900 and 1940, which translates to an average of 40 new buildings per decade. In contrast, only 12 new commercial buildings were constructed along H Street since the riots, and only 3 of these were taller than one story.

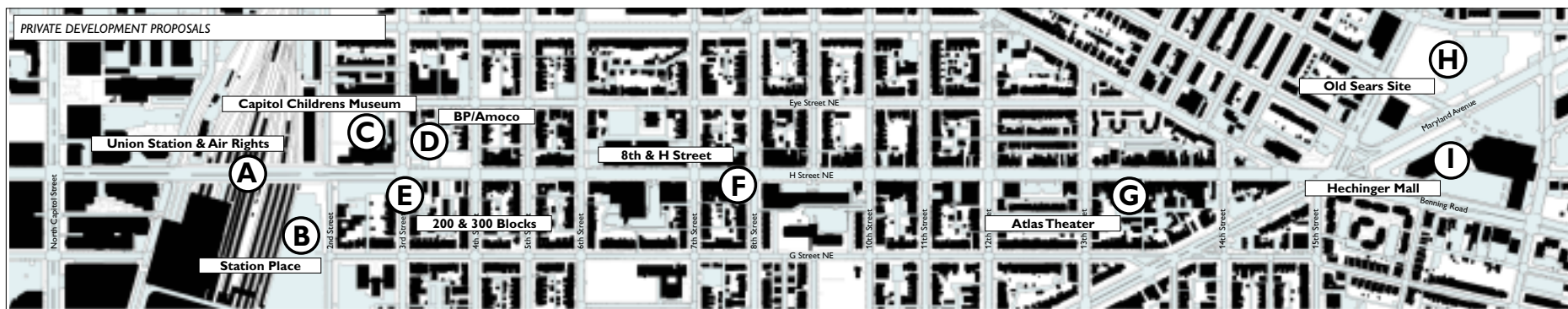
The scale and character of development transformed along with the pace of change. While a few of the new buildings provided storefront retail space—notably the office development on the 600 block—most of the new buildings followed a more-suburban model, with front or side rather than rear yard parking (Hechinger’s Mall and H Street Connection), minimal storefront display space, signage directed to automobile traffic rather than pedestrians (CVS), and building materials and details out of step with the historic context of the street and surrounding neighborhoods (Auto Zone).

While the street’s general decline has been reinforced by the unsympathetic quality of recent development and lingering perceptions that the street remains an unsafe and unwelcoming place, signs of positive change exist and present an important foundation for the Strategic Development Plan. Hechinger’s Mall provides shopping opportunities otherwise unavailable to local residents and the H Street Connection, despite its’ suburban character, has helped maintain H and 8th as the neighborhood’s 100% commercial corner. Several building renovations, storefront improvements, and upper story conversions—central objectives of virtually every Main Street revitalization effort—are planned or underway, the H Street Playhouse is attracting patrons from across the region, and proposals like those for the Atlas Theater are raising the community’s expectation that positive change is a real short term possibility.

Important Travel Route

H Street’s role as an important travel route also has evolved over time. In the early days of the District, H Street served as one of the city’s primary eastern gateways with connections to Bladensburg, the Benning Bridge, and more distant destinations in Maryland.

The popularity of trolleys as a means for mass transportation in the early 1900s further reinforced H Street’s role as local and regional travel corridor. The trolley system also served as a catalyst for the commercial cluster



that developed around the crossing of the H and 8th Street lines, and despite the shift in technology from rail to bus, the intersection of 8th and H Streets continues to serve as the focus of neighborhood-oriented retail and commercial services.

H Street also serves as a primary commuter route between downtown and suburban destinations north and east of the city. Since the construction of the Hopscotch Bridge in the 1970s and the subsequent institution of rush hour prohibitions on street parking, H Street has become one of the most heavily traveled commuter routes in the District.

H Street's function as a travel corridor presents both challenges and opportunities. While high traffic volumes and transit ridership present opportunities for retailers—frontage along busy streets and bus lines often translates to increased sales—high travel speeds, poor quality streetscapes, and the lack of conveniently-located parking diminish the corridor's attractiveness to potential patrons of local businesses. If the transportation system can be designed to better serve the needs of residents and shoppers, H Street's re-establishment as a neighborhood and district destination may be more easily achieved.

2.2 Private Development

Several projects pending or proposed will have a significant impact on the future of the corridor and provide an important foundation for the planning effort.

Union Station & Air Rights (A)

Union Station, located a short walk from the H Street, is among the District's most active destinations. The Station sees approximately 100,000 visitors per day including tourists, local residents and local office workers from adjacent Capitol Hill. The Station includes over 200,000 square feet of retail space in 100 to 120 stores and restaurants, an AMC theater, and 170,000 square feet of office space for Amtrak and terminal functions.

Union Station's current parking garage, which connects directly to the west end of the Hopscotch Bridge, includes 1,400 parking spaces for Amtrak passengers, shoppers and Station employees (200-250). The Station had been planning to expand their garage by an additional 1,200 spaces, but this project has been delayed pending the finalization of plans for development of the Station air rights.

The General Services Administration recently solicited proposals from private sector interests for the development of the air rights over the Amtrak tracks that pass beneath the Hopscotch Bridge. Through a competitive process, GSA selected Akridge Company, a District-based developer of office and mixed use projects, to prepare detailed development plans for the site. Currently, plans are being drafted for a large-scale mixed project to include two office buildings and an inter-modal transit facility south of the Hopscotch Bridge and a hotel and parking facility north of the bridge. Building heights for the site are said to be limited to protect the architectural integrity of Union Station.

Station Place (B)

Station Place is a three-phase development of approximately 1.5 million square feet of office and 950 parking spaces. Phase 1 and 2 of the development are underway and will be occupied by the SEC. Construction of the two 10-story buildings is expected to be complete by the end of 2005. There is no target date for the construction of Phase 3, as a lead tenant has not been identified. Phase 3, approximately 500,000 square feet of office space, is being marketed primarily to the Federal government. The proposed Phase 3 building is to be located on 2nd Street. The building will have a third floor lobby connection to H Street with a primary street address from 2nd Street.

Current plan calls for a pedestrian connection within the buildings from H Street to Union Station, which would be available to the public during normal business hours. In addition, a signalized parking entrance will be located on H Street at the current median break on the Hopscotch bridge. The developer's traffic study indicates that approximately 50% of the cars parking on site will access the site from the H Street garage entrance. SEC will employ approximately 5,000 workers, 70% of whom use public transit.

Capitol Children's Museum (C)

Although a final decision has not been made, the Capitol Children's Museum is considering relocating. Prior to the Museum's occupancy of the 2.47 acre site, the property was controlled by the Sister of the Poor and developed over a

hundred year period as a convent and home for the aged and destitute. Portions of the existing buildings are as old as 125 years with the newer sections dating to the 1960s and 1970s. Although the complex is not currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places or the DC Inventory of Historic Sites, it almost certainly would qualify for both designations. In addition to the Museum, the buildings also house two charter schools with approximately 300 students and a private school of approximately 25 students. The schools are a tenant of the Museum and do not have long term plans of staying in the building.

The Capitol Children's Museum's goal is to become the 'National' Children's Museum, which would allow them to continue to serve the local market, but expand to also serve the national tourist market. The Museum reports that they cannot fulfill their mission in the current buildings so they have explored options to redevelop the site to provide 140,000 to 200,000 square feet of space on a maximum of 3-4 floors thus allowing them to serve a visitor population of 500,000 to 750,000 visitors per year. Such a plan, however, does not take into account the site's historic significance, and would likely encounter strong opposition from local preservation organizations and community groups.

BP/Amoco Site (D)

BP/Amoco has been working with the community to develop a design solution for their proposed gas station at the intersection of H Street and 3rd Street. BP hopes to construct a station with 16 pumps covered by an overhead canopy and a convenience store with associated parking. The latest proposal being discussed by the community and BP locates the convenience store in the southeast corner of the site. The building is sited with the short end of the building abutting the sidewalk, and the entrance doors facing the pump area. The project is scheduled for submittal to the District's Board of Zoning Adjustment in early 2003. Their current plans are accommodated on the property frontage from the existing midblock alley to the 3rd Street to the west. The property to the east of the alley is suitable for redevelopment for other uses and is expected to be sold.

200 & 300 Blocks of H Street (E). Preliminary plans exist for the development of sites along the south side of H Street between 2nd and 3rd Streets and 3rd and 4th Streets. With the exception of a few buildings in poor condition, these sites are vacant and ready for development.

Contributing to the attractiveness of these sites for mid-rise residential and mixed-use development is their location within a short, 8-10 minute, distance from the Union Station Metro).

8th and H Street (F)

The H Street Community Development Corporation (HSCDC) plans to build a retail store at the intersection of 8th and H Street. The current proposal includes the creation of ground level retail (two shoe stores and a fast food restaurant chain) in a single story building. In public meetings about the project, residents expressed concern about the scale, design quality, and mix of proposed uses. (Several fast food outlets and shoe stores exist near the proposed building.) To address some of these concerns, the HSCDC has suggested the addition of a second story façade treatment. The proposed façade treatment would include construction of second story walls with no roof or windows; therefore there would be no occupied floor area.

Atlas Theater (G)

Current plans for the Atlas Theater complex—the Theater as well as the vacant storefronts along H Street—will create two fixed-seat theaters (150 and 250 seat), 'black box' rooms for performances and classes, and dance and music classes in storefronts so that the activity can be viewed from the street.

Parking is an important consideration for the theater. They are currently discussing the possibility of temporary parking on the city land behind the library and investigating the use of the Auto Zone site. The project is currently in concept design phase; design is expected to continue through the summer of 2003, construction into the winter of 2004, with an opening in December 2004. Fund raising is currently underway. The project leaders are also said to be interested in finding short-term housing options for visiting performers/artist such as studio units. They believe that approximately a dozen housing units would be useful.

The building was added to the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites in October 2002, thus making the project eligible for a range of preservation incentive and assistance programs.

Old Sears Site (H)

The owners of Hechinger's Mall also own 4.97 acres of vacant land at the intersection of Maryland Avenue and Bladensburg Road. They are considering two alternative

uses for the land, which was once a Sears store. The first is a residential option that would include a four-story building, surrounding a parking structure in the center of the site and some convenience retail. A density of approximately 50 dwelling unit per acre is anticipated, which could yield 200 to 250 units. The second option is for the development of the land as a large format single tenant retailer in a one-story structure with surface parking.

Hechinger Mall (I)

Hechinger Mall has no plans for expansion on site, but will be undertaking some cosmetic renovations to the building exterior and signage. In addition, Safeway intends to begin an interior and exterior store renovation. The Mall, which includes approximately 25 tenants, is nearly 100% leased including the addition of two recent anchor tenants, Modell's Sporting Goods and National Wholesaler Liquidators. The retail draw of the anchor tenants is approximately 3-5 miles, while the other smaller tenants have a neighborhood customer base. Rental rates are competitive with other non-central city areas. The Mall includes on-site surface parking for approximately 590 cars.

2.3 District Initiatives

The District has several policies, initiatives and programs designed to improve neighborhood livability and promote reinvestment. These, along with a number of planned Capitol investments in the area, will strongly influence the future of the corridor.

ReStore DC

The District's ReStore DC program emphasizes 1) promoting and marketing business districts; 2) improving the appearance and economic health of neighborhood business districts; and 3) strengthening the internal capacity of District government agencies, along with organizations engaged in revitalization activity. The initiative emphasizes local entrepreneurial opportunity, and the strengthening of partnerships among the District government, civic and professional organizations, residents, and business owners and managers to facilitate commercial growth in every neighborhood. Elements of the initiative are described below.

- The DC Main Streets program consists of a comprehensive package of technical and financial assistance for neighborhood business districts. The goal of

the program is to establish and implement a continuous and comprehensive revitalization program in a range of local neighborhood business districts. Each program would be based on a proven national model, The Main Street Four Point Approach: organization, economic restructuring, promotion, and design. H Street was among the first commercial districts designated as a DC Main Street and is in the early stages of organizational development.

- The Commercial District Technical Assistance Program offers direct assistance to any commercial district in the city. Business districts with specific technical assistance needs could apply for matching funds to procure technical assistance or advisory services related to a specific revitalization activity or project(s). Four times every year, the Office of Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development will award grants through this program.
- The Commercial Property Acquisition and Development Fund provides matching funds for non-profit organizations to acquire, redevelop, or build commercial properties located anywhere in the District.
- The Small Business Development Program assists businesses grow and prosper through opportunities for training, workshops, conferences, technical assistance, and access to Capitol. This program component is funded at \$1 million for fiscal year 2002.

Strategic Neighborhood Investment Program (SNIP)

A targeted investment policy wherein priority District neighborhoods or locations receive a series of comprehensive public actions or funds to complement and/or catalyze private sector investment.

Transit Enhancements

The District, with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority, is conducting assessments of potential corridors and routes for expansion of the city's mass transit network. As indicated in the transportation section of this report, early studies identify H Street as a candidate for improvements.

Transit Oriented Development

The District's Transit Oriented Development Program is a smart growth planning strategy designed to leverage transit investment to enhance existing neighborhood centers by creating active and compact neighborhood development opportunities.

Parking Demand Management

This District policy that focuses on creating livable neighborhoods while supporting successful retail through efficient management of parking demand and resources

that may include creative pricing strategies, shared parking, municipal parking, shuttle and transit programs, and flexible design

Housing and Re-population

The District's Housing and Re-population policy directive is aimed at recapturing a portion of the 300,000 citizens lost over the last three decades and to enhance the District's human capital by creating and rehabilitating housing for a wide spectrum of individuals and families.

Home Again Initiative

The District's Home Again Initiative is a program to convert vacant and abandoned buildings into quality, affordable homes. Under the initiative, the District will gain site control of vacant houses and sell them to developers who will rehab them into housing for people of all incomes. This Initiative will focus on empty lots and homes with no occupants.